HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF PALM DESERT

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

O.H. 76

FRANK & LORNA LITTLE

Interviewed by

Patricia Young

July 7, 1980

INTERVIEWEES: FRANK & LORNA LITTLE

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 7 July 1980

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

Y: Interview with with Frank and Lorna Little for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on July 7, 1980, at nine thirty in the morning at their home on Belair in Palm Desert.

I'd like to start this morning talking about why you picked desert area first impressions of the area when you arrived here.

FL: Well, I had been here in the desert different times many years earlier. I think the first time that I recall anything here in Palm Desert or what was then Palm Village was about 1941. I came through a trip to Arizona with my uncle and I remember the reservoir and them playing tennis in the evening. It was very warm and balmy and this impressed me coming from the beach where it's always so cool. And then even earlier

I had been through here and to Indio and to this area here in Palm Springs back in the thirties, so I was well acquainted with this area. And we actually came down here because of our son's health. He had asthma down at the beach.

Y: Which beach then?

FL: Long Beach, yes, so that's why we came, mainly because of the health problem of our son.

Y: When was this?

FL: We lived here after I got out of the service in 1945. And I started teaching at Coachella Valley High School in 1945. Anything else you have in mind?

Y: Yes. Did you actually move into the Indio area or Palm Desert?

FL: No, in 1945 we grew a date garden. A man by the name of Staples, who was an early pioneer down here, we moved on his date garden. There was nothing in the way of housing around Indio following the war. They had no buildings and we were fortunate to find a little place there and we lived there one year. And then we moved up to Sierra Madre. I took an administrative job in a school in Los Angeles County and was gone two years. While we were here that year, from 1945 to 1946, we used

to drive out here to Palm Village. We liked this area, and I told the wife, well, who knows, someday this may be a second Palm Springs. So we bought a lot in 1946, in January, on San Carlos. And then after we had left the area, I got to thinking, well, a vacant lot is of no value so let's put something on it we can rent. So we built a little house, never intending to move in it, just to rent. However, in 1948 the house was finished in the summer and we came back in the fall of 1948 and I came back to Coachella Valley High School. We moved into this house because our son was not getting along too well in Sierra Madre because the smog was rolling in there around Pasadena area at that time. This was about the time smog began to come in the Los Angeles area, so we came back here in 1948 and been here continuous ever since.

Y: At that time, was it difficult to find building materials?

FL: No, it wasn't too difficult. We built a house out of pumice block which was readily available. There was, of course, following the war a shortage of material for a number of years, particularly steel and good hardwoods and that sort of thing. They were very scarce. But the basic materials like the pine and this type of thing

used for framing and that sort of thing, you know, the doorways, that part made out of pine.

Y: You never used a contractor though. Did you do it yourself?

FL: No. There was a man by the name of that was living down here and he had been a pharmacist and he had got tired of the pharmacy business and he decided to go into contracting work. So he built it on a cost plus basis for me, so it was very satisfactory job. He hired other people because I wasn't here, so he took over the hiring of various people so he could complete the house.

Y: Was he doing a lot of building at that time?

FL: Oh, not too much. He had had, I think, one other job that I recall. He had hoped to do more of it. He'd done his own house over here in Palm Desert and so then he took on mine and completed it. And it was finished by the end of August, 1948.

Y: When you purchased the home in January of 1945 do you remember who showed you the property

FL: Yes, all the property was available through the Mullens Investment Company. They were located up in San Marino. And they did have an office over here, as I recall,

someplace along the highway, but they'd closed the office and I had to go to San Marino to find out how to purchase a lot like the

because they had closed this office and were operating out of San Marino. The layout, rather, of Palm Village, as I was told, was designed by the man who laid out Beverly Hills. If you've ever noticed the layout on the north side of the street, there are many sort of culdesacs, circle streets and that sort of vein, which you don't find on the south side here. And they, I don't know, I guess financially broke, they had bought this land from the King Gillette Ranch. As I understood, it was all his property. In fact, when we came here, the house on the type or

where the president of was the old King Gillette Ranch. And that was nothing but cotton all around that house when we moved here. And down at the corner of Monterey and what is now 111 was a mailbox with RFD Indio, which we got our mail from Indio by rural free delivery.

LL: It was all in watermelons.

FL: Yes. It was cotton out all around the area. And I remember about a year after we moved in, probably about

1948 or 1949 we had a siege of caterpillars. I dug a trench in back of the property. I went up to the oil station and got some used oil, a quart of just to stop the caterpillars. There were just avalanches of caterpillars coming across all the fields.

LL: (cough) oil was just so slippery.

FL: This oil would get on them and that would end it, but I've never seen that since. But I guess it was due to the cotton. It was really a (laughter) mess. All these caterpillars. Thousands and thousands of them.

Y: Between the time when you bought your lot and the time that you actually finished your home, weren't there an increase in the number of homes in the Palm Desert area?

FL: No, there was very little building going on actually. One house, I remember over on one of the streets, I can't recall the street, but about two blocks, and it stood for two or three years and they never finished it. It just sat there and finally it was eventually finished. Somebody picked it up but there wasn't much activity in building at all. Most people sort of shunned the desert because they got too hot. It was a place not too great in the wintertime, but not in the summertime especially.

Y: Did that chance once members put in the Palm Desert Club? Or was it still

FL: Well, you mean Cliff Henderson when he came out with his

brother first brought the magazine up from El Central. That was the first building here. And we were here when the press had some little tiny buildings over there. They were actually real estate offices that he was going to develop and the first thing up at the Shadow Mountain Club they had was, I don't believe it's there any longer, but it was a lake. And they said they were going to building a club around this lake. And we were there when they went for the first shovelful of dirt and were supposedly going to build this clubhouse. And they were beginning then to try to sell property. I don't know. The press came here about I think it was probably about 1946 or 1947 as I recall and he got busy with Edith Eddy Wood who was the real estate operator for him and they were the one that is the south side. And of course it was very small I don't know, few blocks south of the highway, which was what he called Palm Desert. And in those days, by the way, there was quite a bit of rivalry. The north side was called Palm Village and the other side was called Palm Desert. Very confusing. Of course, it was influential enough to finally get a post office which got the name Palm Desert and so eventually the

name all became Palm Desert because I assume the Mullen Investment Company had given the name Palm Village because if you look on the escrows and so forth, you'll see, Palma Village, that's P-A-L-M-A, Palma Village, but it was generally known as Palm Village by the Mullen Investment Company. They had a very good thing going. I don't know, I guess they went maybe financially broke or something at this time because they actually didn't set up very much restrictions on the houses. This was one thing if they'd held to a certain amount of restriction for the footage of the house and so forth and renovation and that sort of thing, they could have developed a very nice site on the north side which, of course, it has in more recent years that are types of houses, but it was just kind of a haphazard thing out in the desert at the time and that's the way it works.

Y: Do you think that was one of the problems involved in the area itself in Palm Village?

FL: No, I don't think that was . . . but people at that time frankly weren't interested in the desert. That was all. It was years after Cliff Henderson got Palm Village or Palm Desert going, but for years and year it was nothing. He promoted a lot, put ads in the paper, got people down

here and gave free breakfasts and that sort of thing. But it still, I remember we used to come back in the summertime or at the end of the summer, we'd go to Long Beach in the summer, and if we saw a new building we were quite amazed, you know, if a building had started. And there was nothing going on here for many years. It just stood perfectly still. Now and then somebody would build something, but the desert really hadn't taken hold, at least this area hadn't. Palm Springs, of course, was an attraction, but this area stood still for a long time in spite of the fact they opened the Shadow Mountain Club and got a lot of, you know, movie people and that sort of thing down here. But I'll tell you, it was great for awhile, but then it just fell back again and didn't progress very much.

Y: How do you perceive the whole area in relationship to the rest of the valley in terms of its growth and positions it's had?

H: Well, it's had a phenomenal growth in the, let's say, last five years from 1975 on. But it's tremendous inflation and presently it seems to have, you know, everybody seems to be focusing in on this place now. For years, as I say, it stood by and I had, for example, a piece of property

here that I had for eight years and I couldn't sell it. And I sold it actually for almost what I paid for it after holding it eight years. Things just at a stand-still. There was no rapid increase in values for a long time. And there wasn't too much in rentals. I had some rentals and he had a difficult time trying to keep them rented. If they'd get vacant in the spring, why they stood all summer and fall before you'd get them rented again. So as to the relation of the whole valley, well, of course, this is part of the Coachella Valley and Palm Springs is part of the Coachella Valley and actually as you look at the map or study the map, Coachella Valley and Imperial Valley are simply one, except for the Salt and Sea which basically divides it so the low area is called the Imperial Valley. But, of course, it started early with the land development down there when they brought in the water or the new river from the Colorado. Then, of course, with the flooding of Salt and Sea and that sort of thing, they had new problems with agriculture down there. But it's all part of the same valley and for a long time, of course, Palm Springs is in the upper end and the valley was more or less isolated from Indio and we're as much in between. Cathedral City was a wide

spot in the road and Ranch Rodge was nothing and so Palm Desert didn't amount to too much for a long time either. So really you had Palm Springs, you had Indio and the area around there, Coachella which was by the way called Woodspur if you want to do something with that. Where they got that name was the fact that some of the city used to cut grease men in there and brought a little train in there and picked up wood for its locomotive they called it woodspur. And then it got changed to Coachella. And Indio didn't develop very much for many years. And the last particularly let's say five years all the whole valley has suddenly taken hold and people seem to have found the place.

Y: In talking to some of the oldtimers that you've had in the school, have they talked about the Indian Wells area and its historical importance and their memories of that area

FL: Well, yes. This I just mentioned, he came down here about 1897, as I recall, as a boy. And he's told me the story of how he came down with his father and his uncle, and they came from Redlands. And they camped in Indian Wells and he said none of his people would drink the water. It was a greeny scum.

Because the miners oftentimes got alfalfa and it dropped into the well. See, there was a well where you led your horse down into it and it was green. And he said he drank it and didn't get sick, but they wouldn't touch it. But they camped there all night, he told me. And he was the man who was instrumental in collecting the monument there. I suppose from what he recalls it was the original Indian bell north side of the highway when you're coming into Palm Springs out of Indio. And they actually homesteaded the area of where the was at. And he said he remembered going to school where the Elks Lodge is in Indio and he looked out and he saw a fellow raise a tent. And he went over at recess to find what it was and he was going to establish a paper, which became the Submarine which I believe was the first paper in the valley, which he got the name because it was below sea level. So he called it submarine.

Y: That part about Indian Wells

FL: I think it is, yes. I had him come to my class because I was mentioning and because I always try to emphasize the local history as well as the whole state history because there's a tremendous amount of history in this valley

itself. So I used to try to tell my students, those who were interested, to dig in and find out some of the information here locally about things in the area in which they live. And he came one night. I invited him to come to my class, so he talked and answered questions for about two hours, I guess. I had it taped, which after he passed away, I gave Mrs. Moore a copy. I had a copy of the tape made and gave it to her. But I haven't listened to it for several years. I think he has a good number of these stories on this tape.

Y:

FL: Yes.

Y: Did you talk to him for some years?

FL: Oh yes.

Y: Is she still living?

FL: Yes, she's still living in the Palm Springs area.

Y:

FL: Yes, have you ever read that book The Whole Desert? It's a very fascinating book. I used to recommend it to my students because it gave such a vivid picture of the valley here in her day. You said she came in 1913 and came by train, got off at Coachella. And then her father started the early date gardens here. It's a very

fascinating story about that in here. But came down here in 1897, and he was seven years old, I believe he told me. So he was old enough to remember a lot of this. And then, of course, after that he returned and he was a contractor, and then his last years he also had, I think, twenty or forty acres of citrus. And then he was the instructor in wood shop at Coachella Valley High School where I got acquainted with him. And he always had some very interesting stories to tell. He came through on the last train in the Southern Pacific to the Salt and Sea and transferred down on the south side and the water was rising in the Salt and Sea. And you can see pictures in the library, pictures of this train, where you see the tracks and you see the train out in the water. And he came through on that last train because his father was working with Southern Pacific Railroad and so that's how he happened to be on the train. And came in. Then, of course, they had to move the track to their present location where they are now. And relocated after the Salt and Sea began to rise. But you'll hear people say, well, there's a train and locomotives and that sort of thing under the Salt and Sea. That's stupid to tell me this, but that is not true because

he said they had three years to remove all of the material the Riverpool Salt Company was a British company advertising a little white and blue bag of salt from the Salt and Sea. And they knew the water was rising. They had three years as the sea began to take over. So there may be a broiler or something under there. I've driven over the Salt and Sea in an airplane and I see on a clear day, in other words, you can see something that looks possibly like a locomotive, but it actually is some old boiler that was left from the refinery, the salt plant they had there. Anything else you'd like to know locally here?

Y: Just in terms of trends. When did you say people started coming to the desert as a place to live? Were there elements the growth of the desert as a resort area?

LL: When the golf courses started.

FL: Yes.

LL: Coming down for recreation and . . .

FL: Of course, Palm Springs, as I say, has been there a long time and it's probably getting so when you get something established and people want to know what's on down the rest of the valley, so they began to . . .

LL: Well, and a lot of people moved from Palm Springs because it was getting so crowded coming this way for the same reasons and for the same area of playing golf or swimming and that, and yet they wanted those things and not the rut of so many people. But we're growing too.

FL: The place is getting too congested, actually. We've got so much traffic now and . . .

LL: It doesn't feel like the same place.

FL: No, it was quite a bit different when we came here. Most people came down here to get away from the city and now the city has come to our place and so what have we got? We've got stores, shopping centers, Shopping Center, so it's going to be just another metropolitan place. It's like we've got friends who moved to Leisure World to be out in the country. Now it's like I must say. Traffic is it's worse than Hollywood and Vine and we have the same problem out here. Stand here by the post office and try to get through the traffic here from the signal through there they have and especially around evening time it's getting congested.

LL: Well, it used to be when we first came here we made our

own entertainment. I mean we would swim with the family, we'd swim, we'd have picnics or we'd have a hayride or organizations would do this and if you wanted a performance or something, why they'd get the old theatre and everybody got into it program. I mean everybody did everything with the community.

FL: Well, the man in back of that was Ray Sterns. He was a vaudeville performer and he worked for the water company here. So he got people interested in some kind of entertainment and eventually, I don't know the details, but he got a little theatre down on Santa Rosa. And he was doing community plays and people participated. Then he had barbecues and so forth and you'd spend the whole evening. You'd have dinner and see a play and there were local people and it was really a tremendous source of fun and entertainment. People enjoyed it very much. And later, I believe, the county set up a building over Prosper Wash over here back of, I don't know what you'd call it, right against the hills. I think it's the county building.

LL: Homes?

FL: Yes. In that area. Then play ran some there, but it

didn't take as much as the earlier days when you had that little ear. What do you call it, do you remember? What's that name for it. But anyway it was a very interesting place and local people participated in it.

LL: Carpenter and Mr. Carpenter and and all of them

FL Well, yes.

LL: Putter.

FL: Putter.

LL: And her husband

and so everybody was in little gowns

couple of them

Y:

FL: Yes.

LL: Stanley was in one when he was about seven years old, I guess. It was called

and he was in it with Andrews and

but anyway, he wanted to be in the play, so they got it and they used to run it first every weekend for five or six weeks. So everybody actually saw the play. And it was fun. Everybody seemed to know everybody.

Y:

FL: I was just going to say, then the Dr. McCartney was

retired from the Community Church in Palm Springs, came over here and started the first church. I don't know whether you're familiar with that, but his first meeting was Sunday, was on a horse blanket up at the stables about where is now. There was stables and . . .

LL: Wasn't that place there?

FL: Yes, that's where it was, so he held a meeting up there and eventually Cliff Henderson gave the property or loaned it, I'm not sure which, for a and that is the, for the mental health center there across from the Washington School. And that became the first church in the community and was called the Palm Desert Community Church. And Dr. McCartney carried on there for quite awhile until finally they were able to get a and money enough to hire a minister. But he just volunteered his time to the church, and that's how the church got started.

Y: I just wanted to ask you about the children in the community. Was it at all difficult or did it prove to be a source of for them.

LL: Oh, it was a great place for children. You knew where they were. You knew what they were doing. There wasn't any problems at all.

FL: Didn't have to worry about traffic or anything.

LL: No traffic.

FL: to Indio starter school down here. They bused them from Indio down to Roosevelt School and then eventually, of course, they got the Washington School built and he entered the first class there. Went through there and graduated from the eighth grade. No, the sixth, I can't remember.

LL: I'm not sure.

FL: I think it was the sixth grade. I guess it was sixth. Then he went to Indio for seventh and eighth and then to high school in Coachella Valley because there was no Indio high school in those days. Coachella Valley High School served the whole valley clear to Del Sol which was out by Bob Hope. That was dividing, it still is, right between Desert Sands and Palm Springs at that time, the Coachella Valley High School. And then he eventually started high school in Indio. And it took four years to build the high school. In other words, had the freshmen the first year, the second and so on until they got a four-year high school. As soon as they got the four-year high school then the people in Indio poured out of the district immediately and set up their own school district

which they called Desert Sand. Before that time it was just the elementary school in Indio. And the high school was operated by the whole valley.

Y: Wasn't it a hardship having your children go to school so far away

FL: No, no, no.

LL: When Frank started in teaching at the high school, he drove the high school bus out here. Each teacher that lives in an area, they were responsible for that bus in their area. We used to park the bus outside our house.